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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Buying eBooks: Does Workflow Work? Part I

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for board meetings as well as the thrashing out of the never-ending problems that inevitably arise in the conduct of any complex operation. I traveled to each of the branches to meet with the managers and staff; to visit libraries with the branch managers; to introduce new programs to the branch managers; and to accompany the branch managers on visits to receptive libraries as a form of instruction in a real setting. I also put out the worst of the fires of librarian complaints that, again, inevitably arise in buying-selling relationships.

With the opening of the San Francisco branch, 1963 proved a very busy year that included the quite-by-chance opportunity to experiment with the contemplated, nascent "approval plan" in a genuine library-bookseller setting. For the past year, I had mulled over the fact that I had been buying forthcoming titles from publishers' catalogs, first for one, then two, and now three offices. I based the quantities ordered upon my sense of which titles each of the libraries we served might purchase as guided by their college/university catalogs or the mission objectives of the research libraries, coupled with my growing experience of their purchasing behavior. Now these projected quantities had to be modified to reflect a time lag of 12-18 months for most library-originated orders. This lag flowed from the typical delays in scholarly book reviews, delays caused by journals in forwarding scholarly books to reviewers and delays caused by the reviewers who needed time to read the books and write credible reviews. Scholarly books were not supported by the advance promotion of mass-popular titles but rather

on the sending of review copies. I wondered if there was a mechanism by which we could order suitable titles for the libraries upon publication. If a title requested by some faculty member resulted in a library order based on a delayed review, wouldn't such library users be better served a year or two sooner? I was well acquainted with the then **Farmington Plan** operated by a consortium of large libraries and the **Library of Congress**, but what I had in mind was a program that had none of the rigidities inherent to the former. The titles to be sent required a finer selection sieve, and a simple, clean option to return any title found unsuitable for a specific collection. Well, so much for idle fantasies!

Then, quite by chance, a perfect opportunity arose. In the late winter of 1963, I went to the **Washington University Library at Pullman**, which was recently granted full university status. Thus, the library was deep in the throes of building a collection beyond the typical land-grant collection, and they were collecting widely. In the course of the morning **Don Smith**, the head librarian, came in to **Ann Connette's** office, largely to say hello. In the ensuing conversation, **Don** asked me how it was that we were able to furnish so large a percentage of their orders by return shipment. I explained our new title ordering procedure, as outlined above. I then went on to briefly explicate my fanciful idea and outline the benefits to libraries and their users of sending suitable titles on publication with full return privileges. He was immediately interested and asked me to join him for lunch at his house.

Now **Don** was a thoroughly pragmatic head librarian. He was interested in results. He was interested in broad principles with the view that

the details could be worked out once the main ideas were in place. Further, he was a roughhewn man, little interested in social or organizational niceties. He was always a straight talker, no subsequent reflection on subtleties required. You knew what he meant at the time he spoke. I thoroughly enjoyed working with him and the staff who shared his ways.

We sat down to a peanut butter sandwich in **Don's** kitchen. There I laid out my thinking on what would soon be called the "approval plan." **Don** had several useful suggestions or modifications. With his input in hand, we agreed. A handshake was sufficient for **Don**, as well as for me, and we embarked on a joint experiment. We both understood it was an experiment, and that I would stay in touch by phone and frequent visits as we hammered out the details and any problems. We returned to the campus and **Don** explained to **Ann** the experiment we had agreed to. **Ann** was central to the successful operation of the experiment and, fortunately, was as pragmatic as **Don**.

With this quite unexpected development, I took the flight back to Portland. On the flight home and for several days thereafter, my mind was occupied with how to organize this experiment in-house. Fortunately, **Don Stave** was aboard, and obviously, at our end, he was the man to ride herd on the experiment. I discussed the entire thing with **Don** in great detail. His knowledge of books and library thinking and practices was very helpful in formulating how we would proceed.

So, the firm was now off in a wholly new direction — an idea long contemplated and awash with risk, but now possessed of a setting for its possible realization. 🌿

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Buying eBooks: Does Workflow Work? Part I



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As the demand for eBooks grows, libraries are struggling to develop strategies to accommodate them within current ways of doing business. In an era when workflow consultants prosper and consolidated purchasing is the mantra, it is tempting to think of eBooks as just another binding type and to move forward purchasing them from the library's existing print vendor. Otherwise, eBooks pose a real threat to all of the efficiency gains realized over the past decade. Unfortunately for acquisitions librarians, an eBook represents more than a binding type; and the method of eBook acquisition can have a profound impact well beyond workflow, bearing even on the future success of the entire library.

Not so long ago, vending decisions rested solely in the realm of the library's acquisitions department. A bibliographer sitting in his or her office would identify desirable titles then scribble a note to the acquisitions librarian who would go to the ends of the earth to get the title in the most timely, cost-efficient manner possible. How he or she did this was of no concern to the bibliographer.

With the advent of approval plans, subject

bibliographers suddenly had a much higher stake in who would be supplying the library's books because they would be required to work with that vendor to develop approval plans. As a result, in most libraries today, collections and acquisitions departments work together to select the library's monograph vendor.

eBooks add yet another layer or two of complexity to the acquisition process because they behave differently depending on how they are hosted and because the relationship with the eBook provider extends beyond the "shipping" of content. With print books, the end product is the same regardless of the vendor. A **Wiley** book from **Coutts** is the same as a **Wiley** book from **YBP** or as a **Wiley** book from **Blackwells**. eBooks, on the other hand, behave differently and are discovered differently depending on where they are hosted. In this environment, reference and public service librarians, since they are on the frontlines assisting researchers, have a vested interest in how eBooks are acquired.

Cataloging librarians also have a stake in which eBook vendor is selected. Though it has

become standard practice for eBook publishers, vendors and aggregators to provide cataloging records "free of charge" to their customers, all records are not created equal. Depending on the source, they may be relatively spare, laden with errors, provided one-at-a-time rather than in batch, or non-existent. Since currently there are relatively few eBook records in **WorldCat** and many libraries are already short on catalogers, this consideration can be of primary importance to some libraries.

In addition, to protect the library from pitfalls, library administration may want to take an active role in the eBook vending decision. Someone at the library certainly needs to be taking the long view. Will this eBook provider be around five, ten, fifteen years from now? Will they keep up with changes in technology? Will they promote fair use? Will they have the content we need? Will they continually develop facilities to integrate with our other systems?

All of this does not mean acquisition and selection workflows should not be taken into con-

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Copyright is the bedrock on which book and journal publishing, Hollywood and the music and software industries are based. Publishers are rightly concerned about threats to their businesses posed by limitless copying and digital distribution. And the major intellectual exporters, the USA and Europe, are not about to abandon their intellectual property interests. Rather they will seek to rebalance that author/producer interest with the user interest.

The genius of the concept of copyright is that it has been endlessly adapted to new technologies as they have appeared: photography, film, radio and television, computer programs, and now the Internet. Just in case we believe that "digital is different", it is worth remembering that each of these technologies caused controversy at first, but have become part of the commercial furniture. The same will happen with digital technology and the Internet. When music and drama became copy-rightable, a fee-based system for performing works was invented. It is not beyond the wit of man to see something analogous in the digital world. 🌱

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sideration when choosing an eBook vendor; but they should not drive the decision at the expense of everything else. No MARC records, poor MARC records, and multiple search silos limit content discovery, negating much of the value of an eBook collection. Server downtime equals no access at all. Slow or clunky technology leads to patron frustration. If a publisher pulls its titles from the hosting platform, there is a loss of access. If the aggregator or publisher fails, libraries relying on them will likely be facing many hours of work reestablishing access to the collections they've purchased.

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- EXECUTE ADDRESS CHANGES
- VIEW PUBLISHER PAYMENTS
- SEARCH TITLE DATABASE
- RENEW ANNUALLY ONLINE
- RECEIVE RENEWAL REMINDERS 90 DAYS IN ADVANCE

A good relationship with a distributor who is facilitating but not hosting eBooks will not protect the library from issues arising at the eBook source. Furthermore, since distribution arrangements can fall apart over time, basing the decision to limit the playing field to eBook aggregators available within the library's print vendor database may also prove to be misguided and result in regrets down the line.

It makes more long-term sense for libraries looking to streamline monographic orders to let their workflows be dictated by their choice of eBook vendor rather than by their choice of print vendor, even though this may necessitate reworking approval plans and learning new systems. At this point in time, there is relatively little difference among print vendors. Though each company has its own strengths, the books they ship are exactly the same, and once a book

is acquired, the relationship between vendor and library ends. This is not true with eBooks. The stakes are higher, the issues are more complex, and the differences among suppliers are immense. It would be unwise to minimize these differences merely to preserve workflows.

Fortunately, technology has progressed to a point that with a little bit of effort, print and eBook purchasing can be coordinated even when there are multiple suppliers involved. It is important that libraries evaluate their options carefully as they begin to develop eBook collections and the workflows that support them. 🌱

Column Editor's Note: This is the first in a two part series. Stay tuned for Part 2 in an upcoming issue of *ATG*. — BN

Future Tense — Weeding: The Time Is Now

by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** (R2 Consulting LLC, 63 Woodwell's Garrison, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 603-746-5991; Fax: 603-746-6052) <rick@r2consulting.org> www.r2consulting.org



On a recent flight from Manchester to Chicago, it occurred to me that I must have been the only person in the world who had chosen **Stanley J. Slote's** 1997 classic *Weeding Library Collections: Library Weeding Methods* for airplane reading. I can't imagine why. Who would choose **Dick Francis** or even **P.J. O'Rourke** over a work that begins with this choice 1787 epigraph from the **Reverend Reginald Heber**: "A small collection of well chosen books is sufficient for the entertainment and instruction of any man, and all else are useless Lumber." Although the work is somewhat dated ("The Book Card Method" occupies an entire chapter) it remains an excellent and practical book in its articulation of the benefits of weeding. My pleasure in it is heightened by the fact that my copy, purchased through **abebooks** (now a province in **Greater Amazonia**), was actually withdrawn and discarded from **Sterling Municipal Library** in Baytown, Texas. Every book its reader indeed.

Weeding has been much on our minds lately. In virtually all of the 80+ libraries with which **R2** has worked closely, overcrowded stacks and storage facilities pose a significant problem. They press on the conscience like that extra ten pounds we'd like to shed, or those files we really should back up. Deep down, most librarians of a certain age recall the 1968 **Kent Study** at the **University of Pittsburgh**, which discovered that 40% of the books in academic libraries never circulate — not even once. We uneasily realize that this number is probably much higher 40 years later, when so much content is available in electronic form. We cringe slightly at the size of our print reference and government documents collections, knowing these serve fewer users every year. We begin, with some misgivings, to store or withdraw those bound journal volumes to which we have purchased electronic backfile access. And, as we seek to provide the learning commons, collaborative study spaces, writing centers, and even cafes

that please most users, we confront important questions regarding both the current and residual value of our print collections.

Consider a few specific scenarios we have encountered in just the past couple of years:

- Shelves in the **Davidson College Library** are more than 90% full, and books loom over browsers in towering stacks that require liberal distribution of foot stools throughout the library. At present, the library has neither compact shelving nor offsite storage, though these are under consideration. The library also issues hardhats to visiting consultants. (OK, not really.)
- The **Millar Library** at **Portland State University** has created an exemplary "Collection Containment Plan" that revolves around a concept of "sustainable collection development." Because stacks are

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